

VZCZCXRO3107

OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV

DE RUEHLB #1762/01 3131433

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

O 091433Z NOV 07 ZDS

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0024

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 0860

RHMFIS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1676

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 1854

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001762

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y - PARAGRAPH NUMBERING

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/08/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA DOWNPLAYS SECURITY CONCERNS,
SUGGESTS STRATEGIES FOR ELECTING NEW PRESIDENT

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) PM Siniora confirmed that, in the event parliament fails to elect a president and his cabinet temporarily takes on presidential powers, he would move immediately to appoint new Shia ministers to replace the six opposition members who submitted their resignations one year ago. He claimed to have secured the commitment of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman to protect state institutions regardless of what happened. Though he agreed Sleiman's own presidential prospects were minimal, he did not rule out the possibility that they would be revived should chaos ensue.

¶2. (C) Siniora stressed the role of parliament, the Patriarch, and Lebanon's Muslim leaders in forging a solution to the presidential crisis, advocating that the Vatican, with encouragement from Secretary Rice and the UN, should play a key role. If the Patriarch provides a short-list of candidates and March 14 gives its assurances that it would accept any of those names, but then March 8 refuses, March 14 would have no choice but to proceed with a half plus one vote, with the moral high ground thus on the March 14 side. Agreeing that Syria's strategy, using the French, was to have the Patriarch provide a weak list of candidates, Siniora reiterated the need to pressure the Patriarch to include good candidates. Siniora also noted, however, that the real problem was formation of the next cabinet and its statement. End summary.

VACUUM SCENARIOS

¶3. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with PM Siniora and his advisors, Mohamed Chatah and Rola Noureddine, on November 9. In response to the Ambassador's inquiry as to what technically would occur should parliament fail to elect a president before President Lahoud's midnight November 23 end of mandate, Siniora said, reading Article 62 of the constitution, the government takes over in the event

of a vacancy for whatever reason in the presidency. The authorities of the president are then empowered to the cabinet.

¶4. (C) Under Article 74, he continued, if the seat is vacant due to death, resignation, or any other reason, parliament would meet immediately to elect a new president; should parliament be dissolved at that time, the electoral bodies would act to elect a new parliament, whose first task would then be to elect a new president. According to article 75, parliament would meet as an electoral body only (not legislative), and would discuss no other business.

¶5. (C) Asked whether this meant parliament would convene on November 24 to elect a president, Siniora responded that it would occur on November 14, since Article 73 specified that parliament must convene to elect a president beginning ten days before the end of the current president's mandate. The Ambassador noted that Speaker Berri's argument was that Article 73 did not apply, since it stated this scenario would occur only if parliament had not already been convened for the purpose of electing a president and Berri argued that he had done so on September 23. Siniora dismissed this interpretation, stating instead that the calling to convene is not a standing invitation, but specific to the day in question. If Berri does not convene parliament on November 14, he explained, parliament would convene automatically.

¶6. (C) Siniora further explained that, once his cabinet assumed presidential powers, he would immediately move to appoint new ministers to replace the six resigned opposition ministers, something he would have done "a year ago" if President Lahoud would have agreed, and claimed there were Shia who would accept these positions. He agreed with the Ambassador that there would no longer be a 15 day waiting period for cabinet decrees, in the absence of a president to sign them.

SINIORA EMBRACES ARMY COMMANDER

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¶7. (C) Reporting on his one and a half hour meeting the previous day with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman, Siniora said Sleiman's morale was low due to his decreasing presidential prospects, which Siniora blamed partly on principle, and partly on his own "misbehavior." Sleiman was too much in a hurry to be president, Siniora explained, but "the wind was not in his sails."

¶8. (C) Siniora instead focused the meeting on common accomplishments, including the strengthening of government institutions and Sleiman's role in particular in keeping the army unified. I'm not in the business of appeasing him, Siniora said, but I speak my convictions. He reportedly told Sleiman that he was making every effort to see that a new president is elected, but at the same time was preparing for the eventuality of no election, in which case the army must assume its responsibility by ensuring that law and order is observed completely, regardless of who is to blame. If my son breaks the law, he told Sleiman, you are fully authorized to arrest him. Your job is to protect the state institutions, and keep the army together.

¶9. (C) Sleiman reportedly responded that electing a president by half plus one was dangerous, to which Siniora agreed, stressing that he would try to get support from all circles. Sleiman also confirmed to Siniora that the LAF would not stay in the barracks, putting itself in a position to be "shot in the back." Sleiman will protect all/all institutions, Siniora stressed, adding, "I'm not afraid." He added that he had told Hizballah this last December, when they began to set up the tent city, stating that Hizballah knows what it means for him to say this.

¶10. (C) Sleiman is very depressed, Siniora said, especially about what people are saying about him, and offloaded his frustrations on me. He threatened to resign, but I told him as long as I'm here I'll hand over my powers to the new president according to the constitution. Siniora reassured him that he recognized Sleiman's accomplishments and did not want him to resign, reportedly telling him he was committed to him and that together they had a great responsibility to develop a strategy to strengthen further the role of the army. However, Siniora told him that he was against constitutional changes to allow specific individuals to become president.

¶11. (C) Siniora said Sleiman was especially bitter toward the U.S., whom he claimed accused him of being Syrian and opposed his candidacy. Sleiman reportedly claimed that he had been against President Lahoud from day one, but instead it was the (Sunni dominated) Internal Security Forces (ISF) that received all the moral support. Siniora, accepting blame for not supporting the army by visiting the south during the 2006 war or the north during the summer 2007 fighting in the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian camp, replied that he had given the LAF unconditional support and responded to all of Sleiman's requests, searching every corner to provide the equipment he needed. Over the past 30 years there had been a great change in the Muslims' perception of the Lebanese state and the army, especially after the assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri, so Sleiman should not doubt the government's support, Siniora told him.

¶12. (C) Siniora speculated that Sleiman feared Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea would become Minister of Defense in the next government, reassuring Sleiman that this would not occur. However, the army would be enhanced in terms of numbers, training, and equipment. He reportedly offered to do anything he could to help the LAF.

BRAINSTORMING ON PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

¶13. (C) Reacting to the Ambassador's analysis of where things stand regarding attempts to elect a president, which suggested Robert Ghanem as a likely outcome, Siniora noted that ultimately the election is in the hands of the

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parliament. The Patriarch is the only game in town, Siniora said, and he has said he won't nominate anyone. However, we might be able to convince him if we apply real pressure on him, especially from the Vatican, which, unhappy with the Patriarch's lack of leadership, seems to be moving in that direction. Siniora, noting that he had asked Lebanon's Ambassador to the UN to ask UN SYG Ban Ki-Moon to get Vatican Prime Minister Bertone and State Secretary Mamberti to exert increased pressure, suggested that a call from Secretary Rice to Mamberti also would be helpful.

¶14. (C) Lebanon's Muslim leaders should also play a stronger role, Siniora continued, stating that Saad Hariri and Nabih Berri should request the Patriarch to provide a short-list of names and give him their assurances that they will accept this list. If he does this, and March 14 agrees to go along with the list, but then March 8 refuses, the Patriarch will still be able to say he has done his job, March 14 can say it has done everything possible, and the only option left is a half plus one vote.

¶15. (C) The Ambassador, noting the Patriarch's dislike of Robert Ghanem (whose election, Chatah interjected, would depress the Christians), said absent Sfeir's involvement Ghanem seemed to be the likely outcome. Siniora, agreeing, said the Syrians, using the French, were pushing the Patriarch to come up with a list because they believed he

would name weak candidates. Like (pro-opposition) Bishop Mazloum's list, the Ambassador agreed. Instead, Siniora said, we should push Sfeir to include some of the stronger consensus candidates, then let parliament vote. Siniora and Chatah agreed that March 14 needed to work on the Christians, since a Joseph Torbey or Robert Ghanem presidency would increase support for Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun.

SINIORA TO COME BACK AS PM?

¶16. (C) Siniora, almost as an after thought, noted that the president was not the real problem; formation of the new cabinet and the next cabinet statement were the real issues. Mohamad Chatah told us later that March 14 and GOL leaders now fear Hizballah will find ways to drag out cabinet formation issues for months, meaning in essence that there will be no fully empowered cabinet (as the Siniora cabinet automatically resigns upon the start of a new presidential term). Saad Hariri has begun realizing that becoming PM in such a scenario is a trap, and he has therefore raised with Siniora the idea of returning as PM. Siniora is not eager to do so, Chatah said, but he may have no choice. (Comment: One advantage to Siniora's return is that he would have two titles concurrently: PM-designate in the still-to-be-formed cabinet, and caretaker PM in the outgoing cabinet that still would hold constitutional authority for "housekeeping" matters. The two titles together would at least give Siniora moral authority. End comment.)

FELTMAN